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INDIAN BOTANICAL FOLKLORE

By

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In the religious history of the Aryan race in India, the worship of trees has played an important part. Nothing could be more natural, for at the dawn of history India was covered with immense primaevial forests. In these the scattered clearings must have appeared like islets in a vast ocean of green. Our ancient culture has flourished in the midst of dense forests and on the banks of rivers. The saints and seers of yore retired to these sylvan retreats and constantly thought of the subtle problems of religion and philosophy. These secluded places were the centres of all our cultural activities—i.e. religious, moral and educational. Many *rishis* (seers) used to impart the highest knowledge to the students in their hermitages which were situated in dense forests. So, it is but natural that ancient Aryans developed a genuine love for woods.

It is necessary to examine the notions on which the worship of trees and plants is based. To the primitive Indians, the world in general was animate and trees and plants were no exception to the rule. It is a well-known saying in Sanskrit that "there is nothing in the world where life does not exist." So, from very ancient times, the trees and plants were regarded as animate beings and to harm them was considered a great sacrilege. Lord Krishna has identified himself with the *bo* tree in the *Bhagavadgita*.¹ Shitalā is understood to be the presiding deity of the *neem* tree. In the course of time, various gods and goddesses came to be associated with trees and plants and subsequently they began to be worshipped.

1. 10/26.

To the early people trees provided fruits and fuel which were of great service. The weary traveller rested for a while under the cool shadow of leafy trees. The wood was used for constructing mud houses and furniture. So the primitive man received four fold gain from the trees standing as guards around him. In rustling of leaves and breaking of branches, he suspected the misdeeds of evil spirits. Hence, the sentiments of adoration and fear crossed his mind simultaneously. It may be possible that due to these factors he might have begun to worship the trees for fulfilment of his desires, and used to propitiate them to ward off the malignant spirits.

As trees and plants were regarded as animate beings, so it was strictly prohibited to harm them in any way. Though there was no legal punishment for the culprit, as was the case in many countries of Europe, the moral law was there to restrain him from his nefarious deed. It will be described in the following pages how the cutting of a tree and breaking away its leaves were considered a sacrilege.

The concept of trees and plants as animated beings naturally resulted in treating them as male and female who could be married to each other in a real, and not merely in a figurative or poetical sense of the word. This notion is not purely fanciful, for plants like animals have their sexes and reproduce their kind by the union of male and female elements.

But in our country, the marriage of trees is only symbolical. If a Hindu has planted a grove of mangoes, neither he nor his wife may taste of the fruit, until he has formally married one of the trees, as a bridegroom, to a tree of a different sort—commonly a tamarind—which grows near it in the grove. If there is no tamarind to act as a bride, a jasmine will serve the purpose. The expenses of such a marriage are often considerable, for the more Brahmanas are feasted at it, the greater the glory of the owner of the grove.² Kalidas has mentioned the marriage of a *navamallika* flower with a mango tree.³ What I want to emphasize here is the fact that trees and plants have always been treated as living human beings.

In the following pages an humble attempt has been made to present before the readers the common beliefs and superstitions regarding trees, plants, flowers, fruits, and vegetables which

2. J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. I, p. 151.

3. *Shakuntala* Act IV. (Abridged edition).

are prevalent among the people in rural and even in urban regions of India. This study is very interesting but the consideration of space has prevented the writer in going into greater detail. It would be interesting to note here that these superstitions are not only confined to India but they are found also in other parts of the globe.

The present study has been divided into three parts: (1) Mythological trees, (2) Sacred trees, and (3) Trees and plants of nonsacred character.

(A) MYTHOLOGICAL TREES AND PLANTS

Kalpataru or the tree of eternity is a mythological tree which grows in the royal garden (*nandan van*) of Lord Indra. It is a symbol of plenty, prosperity, joy, and happiness. It is believed that it fulfills the desires of all persons whatever may be their demand. The heavenly gods do not feel the pinch of penury and want due to this divine tree. Its fruits have the power to bestow immortality on the person who use them.

In Sanskrit literature the miraculous powers of this tree are described in great detail. It can offer to its devotees health, wealth, male progeny, and prosperity. It was a product of the churning of the ocean by gods and demons and ultimately it was taken by the former to heaven and planted in Indra's garden. Kalidas has mentioned the fact that *kalpbriksh* used to supply all the cosmetics desired by the wife of the Yaksha who was cursed to live in exile by Kubera.⁴

The *soma* plant (*Sarcostemma acidum*) which used to grow on *Mujavat* mountain yielded a milky, acidulous, narcotic juice. In Vedic India, an intoxicating concoction was prepared from its juice mixing it with milk, butter, barley and water. This drink was used in Vedic sacrificial rites, in honour of Lord Indra. The plant and its juice were considered to have divine powers and were worshipped as the incarnation of Soma, the revered Vedic god of the *soma* juice, deity of the moon, and lord of the stars and vegetation.

Soma occupies the third important place in the galaxy of Vedic gods. The ninth book of the *Rigveda*—which is known as *Pavamān Mandal*—contains a number of *suktas* (hymns)

which are devoted to its praise. The Vedic warriors used to drink this juice before going to the battlefield in order to get strength and exhilaration. Botanical experts have tried to identify this plant but all in vain. Therefore it may be regarded as a mythological plant.⁵

(B) THE SACRED TREES AND PLANTS

The Bo tree

Pipal or the bo (*Ficus religiosa*) is the most sacred tree in India. It is regarded as the dwelling place of the Hindu Trinity—Brahmā, Vishnu and Mahesh. It has been described as the tree of creation with its roots going higher up in the sky and its branches reaching the earth down-wards. It is an immortal tree with its leaves always moving. It may be rightly compared with the English aspen whose leaves move due to shame because it was used in making the cross.⁶

It is strictly prohibited to use the bo tree as fuel. As gods live on it, so it is a sacrilege to harm it in any way. No Hindu can dare to touch it with the least intention of cutting it down. If he does so, he may displease the gods who will then bring disaster upon him.

In northern India, the women worship this tree on the fifteen day of the black half of any month which falls on Monday, i.e. *Somavati Amāvasya*. They pour water and milk on its roots and offer sandal paste, vermillion, wet rice (*akshat*) and flowers. They make circumbulation one hundred and eight times with their hands folded, putting down a sweet or a fruit as a counter for each round. They tie thread round the trunk of this tree 108 times. This is symbolic of its sacred thread, i.e. *yajnopavit*. An old woman recites the story of Raja Nikunjali and his devoted wife Satyavati who was successful in winning the love and the confidence of her husband by paying her homage to this sacred tree. So the worship of the bo is symbolic of conjugal love and happiness.

In Rajasthan, women pay respects to this tree with

5. B. D. Upadhyaya, *Vedic Literature and Culture* (Hindi), pp. 433-34.

6. W. Crook, *Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, Vol. II, p. 98.

their offerings in order to ward off widowhood.⁷ On each auspicious occasion,—such as the sacred thread ceremony and marriage—it is worshipped with due regard. Sitting under its cool shadow, women pray to God to be favoured with a male offspring. It is believed that Lakshmi—the goddess of wealth—dwells on it on Sunday. So this day is especially auspicious for its worship. The man whose father has recently gone to the other world, pours down on its roots the water of 360 pitchers on this day in order to propitiate the spirit of the dead. After offering his watery tribute, he makes five rounds of the tree.

In Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh it is a common custom to hang an earthen pot or a pitcher—which is known as *ghant*—to a branch of this tree. The man who performs the last funeral rites of the dead person—i.e. *dāhi*—pours in water, milk and *til* in this pot twice a day and goes around it five times. It is popularly believed that the water poured in this pot reaches the dead man in the next world and quenches his thirst. In rural areas it is believed that the village god Gram Devata dwells under its shadow, so some unchiselled stones are placed there which are worshipped by the common people.

In the Buddhist world, also, this tree is regarded as very sacred. It was under the bo tree that Buddha—"The Light of Asia"—while sitting in meditation, gained the spiritual inner light and obtained the perfect knowledge and enlightenment of *nirvana* (salvation). Today a bo tree grows in every Indian village near Hindu or Buddhist temples. It is surrounded by a mud platform on which the meetings and meditations of the villagers are held. Bo trees are exceptionally long-lived. The oldest of these trees stands at Anuradhpur in Ceylon and is believed to have been planted in 288 B.C.

It would be interesting to note here that the prohibition to fell the sacred trees is limited not only to India, but in other parts of the world also it is commonly practised. The Wanika of eastern Africa fancy that every tree, and especially every coconut tree, has its spirit. The destruction of a coconut tree is regarded as equivalent to matricide because that tree gives them life and nourishment, as a mother does her child. The Siamese monks, believing that there are souls everywhere, will not break the

7. Campbell, Notes, p. 238.

branch of a tree. Old peasants in some parts of Austria still believe that forest trees are animate, and will not allow an incision to be made in the bark.⁸ The number of such instances can be multiplied. The worship of this tree is prevalent in all the Buddhist countries and also in Africa, New Zealand, Australia and other parts of the eastern archipelago.⁹

The banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) is a huge tree famous for its leafy branches and cool shadow. Some of its branches take roots in the soil and grow out as separate trees. The banyan is the tree of immortality. Even in the time of deluge, when the whole world is flooded with water, it stands out prominently as the eternal tree giving protection to Lord Krishna in his child form. There are many references to it in Sanskrit literature. It is mentioned in *Aitareya Brahmana* that a certain king was asked to drink its milk, leaving aside the juice of the *soma* plant. In the *Rāmāyan* of Valmiki—the celebrated sage of Tamasa—and in the *Uttar Ram Charit* of Bhavabhuti, this tree has been mentioned as the undying one (*akshay vat*) which was situated on the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati at Prayag (Allahabad), U.P. The descendent of this original immortal tree still stands in the fort at Allahabad. It was believed in ancient and medieval times that suicide committed at this place, by throwing oneself from the top of this tree into the deep waters of the Ganges, will lead to salvation. Hence pilgrims coming on their pilgrimage from different parts of India to this place used to commit suicide here. It is an historical fact that after the death of a certain Rashtrakuta king his queens, numbering no less than one hundred and fifty, committed suicide here.¹⁰ The Chinese traveller Huan Tsang has mentioned the existence of this tree at Prayag in his travels.¹¹

It is said that when Satyavan was cutting the branches of this tree, he accidentally stabbed his wife Savitri and she succumbed to her injury. In the state of Maharashtra and Pujarat, women worship this tree to honour the memory of Savitri on the 15th day of the dark half of the month of *Iyesth* (May-June). In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar also women offer their *pūja* (worship) to this tree and recite the story of *Bat-Savitri*.

8. J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. I, pp. 147-149 (Abridged edition, Macmillan & Co., London, 1957).

9. Baker, *Serpent Worship*, p. 18.

10. Altekar, *Women in Hindu Civilisation*.

11. Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey Report*, Vol. I, p. 5.

Many folk beliefs centre around the *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) tree. Shitala (Cool one)—the goddess of smallpox—is said to inhabit it. She rests there seated in a swing. When she experiences the need for water, the gardener, who is her traditional devotee, supplies the same to the goddess. When a person suffers from smallpox, the leaves of this tree are used in several ways to lessen and relieve his ailment. He is fanned by the leafy twigs of this tree. Being the seat of Shitala—the presiding deity of this disease—its leaves are believed to possess a curative effect. There are many folksongs in Hindi in which a stirring appeal is made to the goddess to free the patient from the torment. In the bright half of the month of Chaitra (March-April) which is known as *Nav-Ratra*, special importance is attached to it. The women worship it with offerings of flowers, vermillion and other fragrant objects.

The oil extracted from the fruit of the *neem* tree possesses much medicinal value. The temperature of the patient goes down if the oil is applied to his head and the lower part of the feet. Its flowers have the properties of blood purification when used as a syrup. The soap made out of it cures skin diseases and toothpaste made from it is used for cleansing the teeth.

It is generally believed that a person living on the food cooked by using its wood as fuel will suffer no effect from snake-bite. If a man is thought to have been bitten by a snake, he is asked to chew the leaves of *neem* in order to find out for sure. If he finds its taste is bitter he is regarded as free from the bite. This belief is found in many other countries. In northern Europe the leaves and wood of the ash tree are regarded as the protector against snakebite.¹² The people of Cornwall believe that no serpent can dare come near the ash. If a person keeps a branch of it with him, he is perfectly free from the fear of snakes.

The leaves of the *neem* are used to drive away evil spirits. If a man is possessed of any spirit he is made to experience the bitter smell of the smoke of burning *neem* leaves. In order to ward off the malicious spirits, small pieces of *neem* are burnt in the firepot placed near the door of the confinement rooms. It is believed that the smoke and fire of this wood are powerful enough to prevent the entry of devils and demons into the room.

In northern India, its leaves are used to protect the people

12. Folklore, Vol. III, p. 88.

from spirits of the dead while returning from the cremation ground. They remove the evil effects which are caused by the contact with the dead.

The following belief is common among the people of Maharashtra and Gujarat. When a woman is blessed with a child, an earthen pot, filled with the urine of the cow and *neem* leaves, is placed before the door of the confinement room. This wards off the entry of malignant spirits. It is still a custom among the Chitpavan Brahmanas of Maharashtra that, if a person enters the confinement room, he has to sprinkle cow's urine on his feet with a twig of this tree.

The Brahmanas of Poona hang on the front and back doors of their houses the leaves of *neem* if they are favoured with a child. In Ahmednagar if a man is bitten by a snake, he is immediately taken to the temple of Bhairav, and is administered the leaves mixed with *mirch* (black pepper). The priest tries to remove the effect of the bite by uttering *mantras* (charms) and touching the body of the patient with a tuft of leaves. The Kanphata Yogis (pierced ears) of Kachcha (Saurashtra) get their ears pierced and then use small pieces of *neem* in their ear lobes. They apply its oil to cure the wounds.¹³

Several primitive tribes of Madras worship the *neem* tree. They make the symbol of this tree on the body of their dogs.¹⁴ The Banajaras test the chastity of their wives by means of this tree. The husband throws a stick of *neem* on the ground and says, "If you are a chaste wife, please lift up the staff in your hand."¹⁵ The Doms of Uttar Pradesh believe that Kali—the Divine mother—dwells on this tree. Kuramis also have the same faith. They place the image of this goddess under this tree and worship her with intense devotion.¹⁶

Bel or Bengal quince (*Aegle marmelos*) is called in Sanskrit *shripthal*, meaning the fruit of plenty. It is a common belief that when its leaves are offered to Lord Shiva they lessen the head of his body caused by the drinking of poison. Many devoted persons write the name of Rama on its leaves by means of sandal paste and worship the Lord with them. It bestows eternal virtue (*punya*) on the devotee. In Hindu mythology

13. Campbell. Notes, p. 234.

14. Mullale. Notes on Madras Criminal Tribes, p. 20.

15. W. Crook, Popular Religion, p. 105.

16. Punjab, Notes and Queries, Vol. III, p. 38.

Shiva is described as intimately connected with this tree. Hence he is also called Vilvadanda—one endowed with a staff of the *bel* tree.

Due to its sacred nature, *bel* wood is used in making the funeral pyre for the dead bodies of rich persons. The sacrificial post (*yupa*) to which beasts are tied and offered to the gods is made out of it. It is never used as a fuel for household cooking. The leaves of *bel* possess medicinal properties and are especially effective in curing night blindness (*rataudhi*).

The womenfolk of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh worship and embrace this tree in order to get their desires fulfilled. The devotees of Shiva tie to their pigtails (*shikhā*) the *bel* leaves because they are sacred and pleasing to their Lord.

The bamboo (*Dendrocalamus strictus*) tree occupies the same high status of sanctity as is enjoyed by the *pipal* and *bel* trees. Due to its sacred nature, Lord Krishna used to play on a flute made out of green bamboo. He charmed the *gopis* (devotees) of Vrindavan with its sweet notes and tender melodies. Bamboos grow in clusters, so it is regarded as a symbol of a large progeny. It is known in Sanskrit as *vansh* which literally means a clan or family.

In northern India, the green bamboo and its branches are used in making the bridal *mandap* (canopy) under which the marriage ceremonies are performed. The *arathi* (coffin) of a dead person is made out of green bamboos. Kabir, the celebrated saint poet of Hindi, has referred to this fact in one of his melodious songs. The Brahmana student is given a bamboo stick on the occasion of his sacred thread ceremony. At the time of *shraddha* (last rites of a dead person) bamboo cots are offered to the priest. Though rich persons give costly *palangs* (beds), the bamboo cot has its special significance. It may be mentioned here that only green bamboo is regarded as sacred. The dry one is deprived of all its sacred nature.

Bamboo possesses the additional quality of warding off evil spirits. The Turi tribe of Gujarat place two small pieces of bamboo in the room of confinement, so that no malicious spirit can have its influence on the newborn baby. In Bihar and U.P., the newly married couples place their feet in a bamboo basket and walk 'dead' slowly, so that they may not fall flat on the ground. It is very auspicious to walk in this manner because it is symbolic of a large family. The Pravoos of Poona put on the heads of the bride and the bridegroom baskets made

of bamboo. The Mubasis of Bengal ask the married couples to go around a bamboo post. The Garos and Kacharis of Assam worship the bamboo post after planting it in the ground. It is a wide belief in U.P. that *churail*—a female evil spirit—lives in the groves of bamboos. Its small and thin branches (*koyin*) are used in removing bodily pain.

Ānvala (*Phyllanthus emblica*) is called *amalak* in Sanskrit. It is worshipped by women especially in the month of *Kartik* (November-December) with flowers, sand paste, and vermillion, etc., with a view to be favoured with male progeny. On the ninth day of the bright half of the month of *Kartik*—which is known as *Akshaya Navami* (the immortal ninth)—a special offering is made to this tree. On this auspicious occasion Brahmanas are fed while sitting under the shadow of this tree. This brings boundless merit (*punya*) to the host. The members of other castes who have none to feed them, cook their food sitting under its shadow and take their meal there. Where no big trees are available, a sapling serves the purpose.

It is considered meritorious to offer a kind of white pumpkin (*petha*) to the Brahmanas as a gift. A small portion of the pumpkin is cut out and some small pieces of gold, silver and brass coins are put in the hole. It is covered with a new cloth and presented to the priest who accepts this as *gupta-dan* (a secret gift) blessing the donor to have a male issue. The womenfolk make five circumbulations of this tree, and tie a thread round its trunk each time. This symbolises its sacred character.

Mango (*Mangifera indica*) is the most popular tree of India. It has a number of varieties which are named after its shape, colour and taste. The *langra* of Varanasi and *dashahari* of Lucknow (U.P.) are the most important among them. The flower of the mango is called *manjari* which is highly spoken of in Sanskrit literature as an object producing sentiments of sexual feeling in the hearts of lovers. Its fruit is used as a *prasad* (gift) to be given to the devotees, which brings them prosperity and wealth.

The small branches and pieces of the mango tree are used in sacrificial rites. The oblation may be offered only in that fire which is made out of this wood. The funeral pyre of a person is made of mango wood which is regarded as holy and sacred. In the sacred thread ceremony it is used in various capacities as a wooden seat (*pidhā*) to sit upon and a slate on

which the *brahmachari* writes down the alphabet.

On all auspicious occasions such as birth and marriage, etc., the leaves and wood of the mango tree are used almost at every step. The *torana*—a long rope in which leaves are tied—which is hung around the house is made of these leaves and even in the marriage *mandap* its leaves are used for decoration. The clarified butter (*ghee*) is poured into the sacrificial fire by its leafy spoon. The bridegroom while performing the marriage rites sits on a seat of mango wood.

Some people use its small twigs as a toothbrush. But it is strictly prohibited to use it for this purpose on Sundays and Tuesdays. It is a suitable substitute for *chichindi*¹⁷ on the fifth day of the bright half of the month of *Bhadra* (September-October). It is sinful to remove the leaves from the tree in the night. The green mango tree is never cut down, otherwise it may bring disaster on the person concerned. Its fruit is symbolic of male progeny, hence it occupies a prominent place among the objects of *prasad* (gift).

Palash or the bastard teak (*Butea frondosa*) grows luxuriantly in the forests of India. Its wood is used in producing the sacrificial fire by rubbing two sticks together. Its leaves are symbolic of the Hindu Trinity—Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh—the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of the world respectively. Its leaves are used as plates in taking food.

It is considered sacred to burn the dead body of a person with *palash* wood. The sacrificial post is prepared out of it. The *brahmachari* holds in his right hand the *palash* stick while his sacred thread ceremony is being performed. Kalidas—the prince of Sanskrit poets—has expressly mentioned this fact when Shiva, disguised as a student, approached Parvati to test the reality of her love for the Lord.¹⁸ It was a common custom in ancient India to touch the cows with a *palash* staff in order to separate them from their calves. It may be compared with the English rowan tree which is used by the cowherds of Scotland to ward off the evil spirits which try to enter the cowshed. It is believed in Germany that the cows which are beaten by its sticks yield more milk.¹⁹

17. A kind of plant which is used as a toothbrush especially on the *Rishi-Panchami Vrat* (the fast of *rishis*).

18. Kumar Sambhava, canto-5.

19. Crook, Popular Religion, Vol. II, p. 112.

On the beautiful seacoasts, the tall and slender coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) trees present a fine feast for the eyes. It is said that its sacred character is due to the fact that its fruit resembles the head of a man. This is why in ancient times, the coconut was offered to the gods instead of a human head. Its fruit is a symbol of fecundity, so the women who nurse the desire for a son, are given a coconut as *prasad* (gift) by the priest. In olden days, it was a custom to present it to the king as a gift by the Brahmanas. In all sacrificial rites, it is offered as an oblation to the sacred fire.

The coconut is held in high esteem in Gujarat and Karnatak (Mysore). It is customary in Gujarat to present its fruit to the bridegroom by the bride at the time of her marriage. It is preserved as a precious memento by the husband throughout his life. The people of Mysore worship it as a family god. The Kunabis of Konkan region in the state of Maharashtra worship the coconut which they preserve in the memory of their ancestors. At the time of harvesting, they distribute this fruit among the labourers. The members of the Prabhu caste move a coconut around the head of the bridegroom several times and then throw out its pieces in all directions. They believe that this rite prevents the evil spirits from having an influence on the bridegroom.²⁰ In northern India, during the marriage and *tilak* ceremonies, the offering of the coconut is considered as very auspicious. The head of a dead Sanyasi used to be broken open through the *brahma-randhra*—i.e. the hole in the head. In western India, it is understood that the sea in high tides may be appeased by offering a coconut. It is a common sight in Chaupati at Bombay to see a number of devotees, on the full-moon day, making their offerings to the Lord of Waters.²¹

The sandal is a rare tree which grows only on the Malay mountains in the State of Mysore. In Hindu mythology it has been described as surrounded by snakes which are attracted by its fragrance. It is believed that the wind passing through it has the property to transform other trees into sandalwood. The Sanskrit poets have given a fine description of the cool breeze coming from the Malay—*malayanil*—as soothing the

20. Crook, *Popular Religion*, Vol. II, p. 106.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

tender hearts of lovers.

It is regarded as a sacred tree like mango and bo. The devotees of Vishnu apply the sandal paste to their forehead; this is a distinct feature of their sect. The sandal is cut into small pieces, or powdered and mixed with *ghee*, then thrown into the fire as an offering to the gods. Along with barley and *til* it is also offered as an oblation.

It is the fortunate few whose funeral pyre is made out of sandalwood. The poor who cannot afford the luxury of it put at least one or two sticks into the pyre of the dead. Beside Hindus, the Parsees of Bombay burn sandal dust in their houses. It is commonly believed that no evil spirit can dare come near the house where its fragrance pervades. It is used also for extracting oil and scents. The sandal forest is the monopoly of the state government of Mysore.

The birch tree (*Betula utilis*) is very effective in charms and spells. In ancient India, it was used as a material for writing. Many Sanskrit MSS are preserved which are written on the bark of this tree (*bhurja-patra*). The *mantras* or spells are written on its bark with red ink by the priest or the Pandit and given to the devotee as an amulet to cure disease. It also possesses the power of keeping away demons and devils. No evil eye can harm the person who puts on the amulet. So the mothers tie around the neck and the right hand of their young children the *tabij* (amulet) prepared by the priest or the fortune teller.

The *tulasi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) is the most sacred plant in India. No plant in the world commands such an universal respect, adoration and worship from the people as does *tulsi*. It is the plant par excellence.

Haripriya—which means dear to Lord Vishnu—is a term in Sanskrit applied to *tulsi*. It is also called *bhutaghni*, the killer of demons. Hence there is a strong belief in the country side that evil spirits can never dare come to the place where *tulsi* is planted. This plant is worshipped all over the year but a special importance is attached to its *pūja* in the month of *Kartik* (November-December). The womenfolk plant a *tulsi* sapling in their house and they worship it twice a day with wet rice, flowers, vermillion, and sweets. A lamp filled with *ghee* is lighted daily and a regular *arati*²² is performed in the morning

22. The offering of a lamp of *ghee*.

and evening. They offer the water of the Ganges to it and chant a *mantra* (spell) which means that the worship of *tulsi* removes all the sins and the devotee is granted wealth and happiness in the world.

It is strictly prohibited to pluck off the leaves of *tulsi* on Sunday and Tuesday. It is a sacrilege to boil its leaves in hot water because it torments the soul of the plant.

The Vaishnava devotee offers his daily meals to Vishnu by putting a leaf of *tulsi* in his food. It is believed by the people that the menu of the ceremonial dinners at auspicious occasions can not come to a finish if *tulsi* leaves are thrown into it. On the eleventh day of the bright half of the month of *Kartik*, the image of Vishnu is worshipped with its leaves. The *tulsi* is married to Vishnu on this auspicious day, hence it is known as *Haripriya*.

The leaves of *tulsi* along with the water of the Ganges are put in the mouth of a dying man under the belief that they will lead to his salvation. Many *sadhus*, particularly those belonging to the Bairagi sect, put on a garland of *tulsi* around their necks. They count or chant the names of Ram on its beads. It is understood that if a man swears while taking in his hand its leaf and Ganges water, he dares not tell a lie. So, even in modern days, this practice is resorted to in Indian courts in order to extract the true facts of a case from the culprit or the witness.

Tulsi is regarded as the mother and hence is called *tulsi mata*. Indian folk songs are full of praise of this plant. Its leaves possess medicinal value and are used to cure fever, cough and other diseases.*

The banana or plaintain (*Musa sapientum*) is found almost

* It may be interesting to note here a news item which appeared in the Northern India Patrika, Allahabad (U.P.), India, dated May 26, 1963, which informs us that the research carried on in the Ballabhbhai Patel Chest Institute has led to the conclusion that *tulsi* is very useful in resisting the growth of tubercle bacilli. The news item runs as follows:

"Tulsi—the plant with divine qualities—is found to have active substance to resist the growth of tubercle bacilli. *Ocimum sanctum* (Tulsi) was for ages considered in India to possess medicinal qualities and was used to cure many an ailment.

A study carried out by the Ballabhbhai Patel Chest Institute here (New Delhi) has shown that the oily substance obtained from Tulsi was active against *T. Bem bacteria*."

in every state of this vast country. It is a sacred plant which is particularly worshipped in the month of *Kartik*. Its long and broad leaves are used as plates for food. In the state of Tamil Nad, Brahmanas always take their food on its leaves. On auspicious occasions the gates are made with the trunk of the banana. Its leaves are used in decorating the marriage *mandap*. In the Naini Tal district of Uttar Pradesh the image of Nanda Devi—a local goddess—is carved out of a trunk of banana. The hill people worship the goddess on the occasion of *Nandashtami* fair. If a premature delivery is caused to a woman in Tamil Nad, the newborn baby is made to sleep each day on a fresh leaf of banana.²³ Its fruit grows in clusters, hence it is regarded as symbolic of fecundity. The newly wedded bride is given this fruit as *prasad* (gift) which assures her progeny. The childless women worship the rising sun on the sixth day of the bright half of *Kartik*—which is known as *Dala Chhath*—offering to him milk, banana, and sweets, in order to be blessed with a male issue.

The *kush* grass (*Eragrostis cynosuroides*) has a wild growth on the marshy lands and on the banks of the rivers. It is no exaggeration to say that no sacrificial rites can be performed without this sacred grass. Hence the priests and Pandits make it a point to collect the *kush* on the fifteenth day of the month of *Bhadrapad* (September-October) which is known as *Kushotpatani Amavasya*. While pulling it out the priest utters the *mantra*, “*Om Phat Swaha*”.

The *kush* grass is strewn over the small platform (*vedi*) which is used for marriage rites. The bridegroom puts a ring made of it on his middle finger. If a man swears by truth he puts a small piece of it with water in his hand. When an offering is given to a dead person, the *til* and *kush* are used there. If a person dies in a far-off land with no religious rites performed after his death, an effigy is made out of *kush* grass which is known as *kush putrika* and is burnt in the fire. A dying man is made to lie down on the mat of *kush* before he breathes his last. It is potent enough to drive away the demons and evil spirits. The *sadhus* tie around their waist a girdle of *kush*, so that no malicious spirit can torment them.

Gudahul or shoe flower (*Hibiscus rosasinensis*) is a big flower, red in colour. It is a favourite with the goddess Kali

23. Crook, Popular Religion, Vol. II, p. 108.

—the Divine mother. So the *shaktas*—the devotees of Durga—offer this flower in their daily worship. It is also used in offering *argh* (watery oblation) to the Lord of Light (Sun). People believe it to be the dwelling place of Kali Devi. So the women ask their children not to touch its flowers, especially during the summer season.

The shoe flower is the most suitable medium for charms and incantations. The witches perform their evil designs through it. It is a common sight in India to witness this flower, in the early morning, placed on the ground at the crossings of highways and byways. People believe that any one who touches it, is possessed by evil spirits.

Kevada or screw pine (*Pandanus odoratissimus*) is regarded as the dwelling place of serpents, so nobody plants it near his house. Its flower is noted for its sweet smell and is believed to attract snakes.

The Lotus is a beautiful flower famous for its tenderness, smell, and surpassing beauty. It is the seat of Saraswati—the goddess of learning. It serves as a cosy repose for Lord Vishnu who rests on it. Many celebrated Sanskrit poets have sung hymns of praise about this wonderful flower. It is regarded as the perfect symbol of beauty, prosperity and unity. It smiles to see the shining sun and closes its eyes (petals) in the darkness of the night. It is a favourite flower with Shiva. The lotus may be regarded as the national flower of India.

Suryamukhi or the sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) is big and round in shape. Generally it has a yellow colour. It is said that it always faces the sun, so it changes its direction accordingly. When Francisco Pizarro in 1532 fought his way into Peru, he found there the giant sunflower venerated by the Indians as the sacred image of their sun god. The Incan priestesses—the Maidens of the Sun—wore on their breasts large sunflower disks made of virgin gold. The sunflower seeds were also sacred food to the Plains Indians of North America. They placed ceremonial bowls filled with sunflower seeds on the graves of their dead, for food to sustain them on their long and dangerous journey to the other world.²⁴

24. Ernest & J. Lehner, *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees*, p. 48.

(C) TREES AND PLANTS OF NON-SACRED NATURE

Gular (*Ficus glomerata*) is a very useful tree. A juicy substance comes from its stem when it is cut down. Due to the medicinal value of its juice, it is known as *hem-dugdha* (of golden juice) in Sanskrit. It works wonders to cure hysteria and prevent abortion. According to Hindu Mythology, the seat of god Vivaswān, who is worshipped at the end of the *soma* sacrifice, is made of this wood. The royal throne of the god Soma is carved out from its trunk. Manu—the law giver—has ordained that the staff used by the Vaishya student at his sacred thread ceremony should be made of it. It is believed that in the night of *Dipavali*—the festival of light—all the gods gather together on the top of this tree and they pluck out its flowers, so its blossoms are seldom seen. It is a common belief in the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar that if the flower of *gular* (wild fig) is put in the vessel of cooked food or in the store house, they will never become empty.

It is most inauspicious to plant a *gular* sapling near a house. It is regarded as a tree of gloom and sorrow. So, Bhojapuri mothers curse their naughty children if they sit and weep under it, and eat its unpalatable fruit which is known as *goda*. Its mere shadow is enough to deprive a person of all his piety and virtues. Hence religious men and women pointedly try to avoid coming near it.

The *shalmali* or silk cotton tree (*Salmalia mala baricum*) is of huge dimensions, almost touching the sky. One of the hells mentioned in the Puranas is named after it. People who have to visit this hell due to their sinful acts are bitten badly, and thorns of this tree—which are known as *kuta shalmali*—are pierced into their bodies. The palanquins used by brides and bridegrooms in their marriages are made of this wood. The primitive tribes—mostly Kols—plant a post of silk cotton in the marriage *pandal*. In Uttar Pradesh, Bansphora—a depressed class—also use its post in their marriages. It bears a big red flower which is devoid of all smell.

The silk cotton trees which rear their enormous trunks to a stupendous height, are regarded with reverence throughout west Africa. Among the Ewe-speaking people of the Slave Coast, the indwelling god of this giant of the forest goes by the name of Hutin. Trees in which he especially dwells are surrounded by a girdle of palm leaves and sacrifices of fowls and

occasionally of human beings are fastened to the trunk or laid against the root of the tree.²⁵ In India it is believed that evil spirits dwell on this tree hence people fear to go near it in the night.

The Mundas and Santals of Bihar worship the *mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*) tree on the occasion of marriage. It is held in high esteem by several primitive tribes of Madhya Pradesh. The Bhuyias place a small branch of this tree on the hands of the bride and bridegroom. A curious custom prevails among the Gonds in that they hang the dead bodies of their relatives to a branch of this tree before burying them.²⁶ But in Bihar and U.P. it is looked down upon because its leaves are not used on any ceremonial occasion. The Brahmanas consider it a sacrilege to take their food on a plate made of its leaves. Even a casual stroll under its shadow is regarded as inauspicious because it may produce an intoxicating influence.

The flowers of this tree are used in making the country liquor, and its fruits are useful in preparing the oil which the village folk use to light their cottages. In ancient India, beautiful garlands were made out of the *mahua* flowers at the time of *swayambar* (choosing of the bridegroom by the royal princesses). Sanskrit poets have spoken very highly of the beauty and delicacy of these flowers.

The *babul* (*Acacia arabica*)—which is known also as *kikar*—is found extensively in the plains of northern India. It grows on its own accord and is never planted by anybody. It is the most unsacred tree in the Indian botanical world. Hence its use is prohibited in all sacrificial rites. It is said that *churail* dwell on its branches. If a man pours out water on the roots of this tree continuously for thirteen days, he can overpower the evil spirit living on it. William Crook has mentioned a true story where a 'dead' man returned to life because he had controlled the dead spirits²⁷ which were living on it. He has described another incident where some Muslims tried to fell a *babul* tree situated near a temple. But blood began to come out from the wound. Being scared by the devil, they fled away in hot haste.²⁸ If a man sleeps on a *babul* cot he dreams bad dreams. Its fruits are potent enough to create troubles and

25. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. I, p. 148 (Abridged edition).

26. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p. 148.

27. Crook, *Popular Religion*, Vol. II, pp. 114-15.

28. *Ibid.*

quarrels among peaceful neighbours. Its leaves and skin possess medicinal properties which cure many ills. Its gum is used as a tonic. Its small and thin branches make fine toothbrushes which are daily used by the village folk.

The palm (*Barassus flabellifer*) belongs to that category of Indian trees which are regarded as nonsacred. It is a tall tree with no branches at all except some big and broad leaves on the top. Its juice—which is known as toddy—possesses intoxicating properties and is used as common beverage by the low castes of northern India. The poor people who cannot enjoy the luxury of champagne or claret satisfy themselves with this juice. It works as a stimulus to labourers and workers and hence they drink it to their heart's content. The toddy shops are auctioned by the excise department for a fairly large amount, so they are a chief source of revenue for the state exchequer.

Judged from all canons of utility, the palm wood is useless. It can neither be used as fuel nor can any construction be made out of it. It is believed in rural areas that *khatamals* (bedbugs) multiply in thousands if a fruit of the palm is placed on the cot. So the women of the household take great precaution not to allow it in the house. It is an ideal place for evil spirits to live in. If a man is suffering from a certain eye trouble (*anjan hari*), he has but to point his little finger towards this tree in order to get himself cured.

The pumpkin (*Cucurbita maxima*) is a common vegetable used by the rural people. Its creeper is planted near the house and it is allowed to spread over the rooftops. Its small fruit is known as *batiya*. It is a popular belief in the country side that if this fruit is pointed out by *tarjani* (the first finger), it automatically dies out on its own accord. Tulsidas—the celebrated Hindi poet—has referred to this fact in his *Ram-Charit Manas*. In order to give a fresh lease of life to this dying creeper, the water in which gold ornaments have been washed, is poured out onto its roots. Earthen pots painted with black and white colours are placed in the fields to ward off the evil eye which may prevent the growth of its fruit.

The pumpkin is regarded as a symbol of one's son, hence no women, having a male issue, can dare cut it into pieces. The boys of the household are asked to break it first, only then can the house wife touch it. No dish can be prepared of this vegetable on Sundays and Tuesdays. If it is done by mistake, the woman who is favoured with a son should not mix salt into

it. The growing of pumpkins in abundance is looked upon as inauspicious.

There are several kinds of vegetables which are rich in folklore. *Sataputia* which is called in Sanskrit *sapta-putrika* (possessing seven sons) grows in clusters. The women folk of Bihar and U.P. observe a fast on the seventh day of the black half of the month of *Āswin* (September-October) known as *Jiutia*. It is essential to eat this vegetable on this particular date which assures numerous offsprings (at least seven sons).

Karami or *karemu* is another vegetable which is particularly taken on the fifth day of the bright half of the month of Bhadra Pad (September-October). The fast of *Rishi Panchami* is observed on this day and *tinni* rice (a kind of rice grown in water without ploughing the land) is used for this purpose.

The skin of *lauki* (Gourd), if trampled under the feet, leads to many skin diseases, hence it is immediately thrown out of the house. If fishes are placed under the *alval*—the water basin which is dug out around this plant—it yields in abundance. The oven dusts are scattered over its leaves in order to protect the plants from insects. It is strictly prohibited to use the *nenuā* vegetable during the black half of *Āswin* by a person whose father is not alive.*

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